

BRIEF HISTORY OF LABOR DAY

By Clarence Buchholz, Financial Secretary

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With Labor Day approaching many people are making plans to enjoy the last holiday of summer. Some may even call it a celebration, but they are not quite sure why. What is this holiday about? How and why did it originate?

Labor Day certainly wasn't an idea developed in the halls of congress and forced under the pen of President Cleveland. Peter McGuire, a New York carpenter and Mathew Maquire, a New Jersey machinist who co-founded the precursor to the American Federation of Labor (AFL), decided something should be done to recognize the accomplishments already made toward creating a better workplace in America. They worked with the Central Labor Union of New York and organized the country's first Labor Day Parade—10,000 people took to the streets of New York City on September 5, 1882 and unofficially the holiday was born.

Almost two years later in the latter part of June 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed a bill designating the first Monday in September as a national holiday honoring workers. However, after he signed this bill on July 4, 1894, President Cleveland sent the Army to crush striking Pullman workers in Chicago. Thirteen strikers were killed by the soldiers and union activist Eugene Debs went to jail because he refused to call a halt to the American Railway Worker's strike.

Most working Americans take for granted the labor laws which protect them from an all-to-often greedy industry. And they also take for granted the accomplishments of organized labor and it would be good to remember some of these hard fought gains—the 40 hour week, unemployment insurance, pensions, workman's compensation, safety programs, paid vacations, paid holidays, to name a few. Over the last 120 years, workers in this country have

fought and sometimes died for these gains. In many instances, government troops and police were called out to crush strikes. At times beating or firing on protesters. Here are some of the gains and a few of the many incidents of struggle and sacrifice of America's labor movement.

3 July 1835—Children employed in the silk mills in Paterson, NJ went on strike for the 11 hour day/6 day week.
1860—Eight hundred women operatives and 4,000 workmen marched during a shoemaker's strike in Lynn, Massachusetts.

21 June 1877—Ten coal mining activists ("Molly Maquies") were hanged in Pennsylvania.

23 November 1903—Troops were dispatched to Cripple Creek, Colorado to control striking coal miners.

8 June 1904—The Colorado Militia attacked striking miners at Dunsmuir, killing 6 union members and taking 15 as prisoners. Two days later 75 strikers were rounded up and deported to Kansas.

22 November 1909—The "Uprising of the 20,000." Female garment workers went on strike in New York, many were arrested.

25 March 1911—The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire resulted in the loss of 146 lives, mostly women and young girls. The reason? Most exit doors of the sweatshop were locked, a standard procedure of the time to help keep employees under strict control.

24 February 1912—Women and children were beaten by police during a textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

11 June 1912—Police shot three maritime workers (one was killed) who were striking.

20 April 1914—The "Ludlow Massacre." Company guards and other mine operators were sworn into the Colorado State Militia and then attacked a union tent camp with machine guns and set it on fire. Five men, two women and twelve children were killed.

26 August 1919—United Mine Workers organizer, Fannie Selling was gunned down by company guards in Brackenridge, Pennsylvania.

1932—With strong labor endorsement, Wisconsin became the first state to create an Unemployment Insurance Act.

1938—The Fair Labor Standards Act created a .25¢ minimum wage and time and a half for hours over 40 per week.

1941—The AFL-CIO announced a no-strike pledge for the duration of the war.

1949—An amendment to the Fair Labor Standard's Act of 1938 directly prohibited child labor for the first time.

1964—The Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination in employment based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

1968—The Age Discrimination in Employment Act went into effect, making it illegal to discriminate in hiring or firing people between 40—65 on the basis of age.

13 November 1974—Karen Silkwood was killed on her way to meet with a reporter and deliver documents that proved her allegation that safety was being compromised by the Kerr McGee Company in Cimarron, Oklahoma.

So fire up the grill, take a swim in the lake, or lounge in a chair and watch television. But remember those who made this last holiday of summer possible—*The American Workers and the accomplishments of Organized Labor.*